Masabumi Kikuchi

Black Orpheus

ECM

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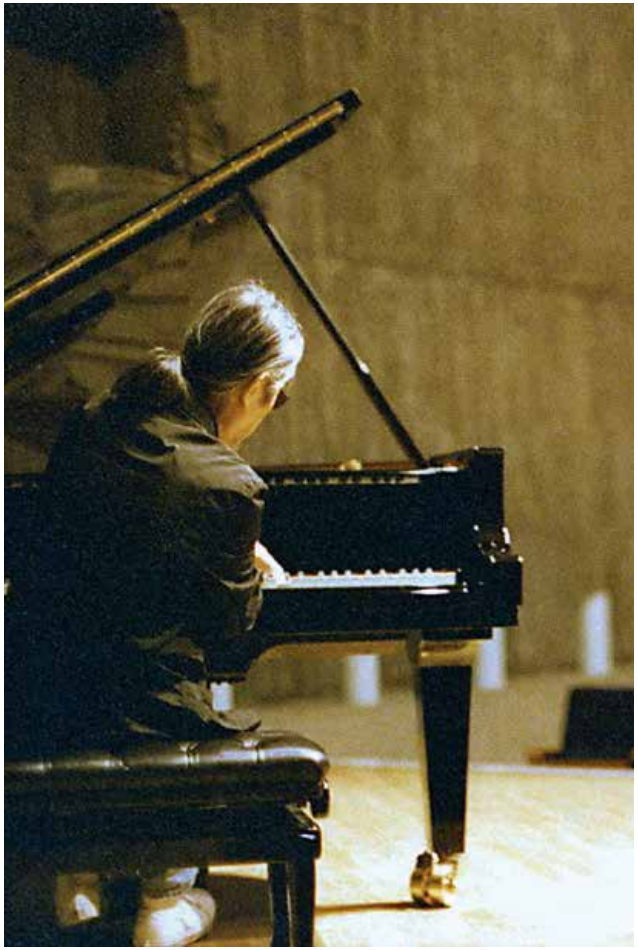
Black Orpheus

In Concert

Tokyo Bunka Kaikan Recital Hall

Tokyo Part I	5:52
Tokyo Part II	3:57
Tokyo Part III	5:33
Tokyo Part IV	7:27
Tokyo Part V	5:05
Black Orpheus	8:17
Tokyo Part VI	6:38
Tokyo Part VII	7:38
Tokyo Part VIII	6:30
Tokyo Part IX	7:09
Little Abi	7:43

Music by Masabumi Kikuchi
except "Black Orpheus" (Manhã de Carnaval)
by Luiz Bonfá and Antônio Maria



Scenes from a Journey

It may take a moment to understand the art of Masabumi Kikuchi. Initially I was a skeptic: Why was my hero Paul Motian hiring this strange pianist to repeatedly play with him at the Village Vanguard? I still vividly remember my "eureka" moment, which was a long, demented, and terribly sad intro to the old torch song "Last Night When We Were Young." When the band came in, it felt like everyone onstage and in the room was collectively mourning the great catastrophes of the 20th century. It was the right message to receive. Later on, when I got to know him a little bit, Masabumi told me he was there as a tiny boy during the firebombing of Tokyo at the end of World War II.

Motian recognized and supported Kikuchi as a fellow renunciate. While they both learned to play conventional jazz with master jazz musicians, their mature music is a rejection of convention.

Masabumi first came to prominence as a fire-breathing energy player in the McCoy Tyner / Chick Corea mode, even playing in Elvin Jones's band, sometimes with Jimmy Garrison on bass. Next was a long friendship with Gil Evans. He studied composition with Gil and was second keyboardist in his big band. The work with Gil led to an unreleased session with Miles Davis. After 70's and 80's funk years were over, Masabumi renewed an earlier Japanese association with Gary Peacock for a New York group with Paul Motian eventually called Tethered Moon. I saw their first gig at Visiones in about '92, where they played Paul Bley-associated tunes like "Moor" and "When Will The Blues Leave."

Soon enough Masabumi would distance himself from all previous influences. At this point something truly personal and unquestionably Japanese seemed to manifest in his art: Distant, subtle, precise, opaque.

He kept on this path, mostly with Paul, who was just about the only major leader who hired him. Motian's imprimatur eventually led to Masabumi's first superb ECM record *Sunrise* with Motian and Thomas Morgan.

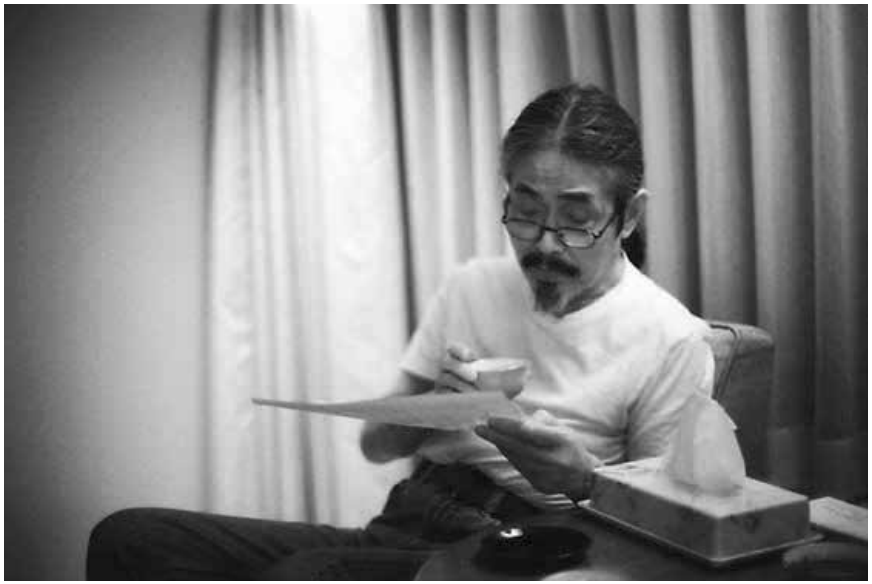
After Motian died, it was probably only a matter of time before Masabumi left as well. He was unsuited to contemporary musical life in New York City without a protector. Masabumi was a troubled, combative personality. A real old-school egocentrical 20th-century artist of the highest order. I was one of several that tried to help out, but he was determined to be his own man, even if it meant burning bridge after bridge after bridge. He once told me, "I've offended everybody and I'm completely broke. It's very interesting to be an artist."

The best of Masabumi has extraordinary vulnerability and corresponding extraordinary magic. On this solo recital the adagios are truly remarkable. (Stuck on his Steinway was a scrawled reminder: "Play slower, I sound better when I play slower.") His harmonic control was refined and unique. When I asked him about studying classical music, he told me he looked at some Alban Berg scores, but ended up transcribing Berg from recordings instead in order to internalize the language better. When the music is faster, he crosses hands and

creates a kind of mutter in the middle of the piano, usually thickened by provocative vocalization.

This concert in Tokyo may have been a homecoming. Sadly, it was the last time he performed a solo recital anywhere. The encore "Little Abi," written for his daughter, was celebrated as an important work in Japan ever since the first recording with Gene Perla and Elvin Jones many years before.

Ethan Iverson



The concert was part of Sound Live Tokyo
Thanks to PARC – Japan Center, Pacific Basin Arts Communication

Recorded live October 26, 2012
at Tokyo Bunka Kaikan Recital Hall
Recording Director: Satoshi Takahashi
Recording Engineer: Masatoshi Muto
System Engineer: Shinya Tanaka (SCI)

Mixed at Rainbow Studio, Oslo
by Manfred Eicher and Jan Erik Kongshaug (engineer)
Cover Photo: Fotini Potamia
Liner Photos: Abby Kikuchi
Design: Sascha Kleis
Album produced by Manfred Eicher

An ECM Production

Piano Tuner: Norihito Onuma
Special Thanks: Tsunenobu Kawada

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